DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 039 951 PS 003 303

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TITLE Address at Combined Meeting of N.Y.C. Early Childhood Council and the Metropolitan Association for Childhood Education on "Language Arts Materials in Early Childhood" (Teachers College, Columbia University, April 6, 1968):
PUB DATE Apr 68
NOTE 16p.

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.90
DESCRIPTORS Behavior Development, Concept Formation, *Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, *Instructional Materials, *Language Arts, Language Development, Literature, Reading Development, Symbolic Learning

ABSTRACT

While the increased availability of specific materials designed for language arts curriculums offers teachers convenience, it is important to continue to evaluate materials according to their usefulness as tools to aid the teaching-learning process. Language arts materials can be classified according to function: (1) those that encourage imitating the English language, (2) those that associate symbols with meaning, (3) those that aid in the recognition of symbols and symbol systems, (4) those that support the use of symbols for communication, (5) those that aid the development of physiological function, (6) those designed strictly for reading, and (7) those that can be called literature. New rationale should be used in the selection of children's literature, rationale that would weigh heavily the possibility for children to enjoy and identify with the story. Approaches to language arts curriculum and materials must consider (1) the way all children learn language, and (2) the pattern of anticipatory behavior and the relation of antecedent practice to later goals. The younger the child, the more language must play a supportive role to sensory learning. (MH)

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Address given by Dorothy H. Cohen at Teachers College, Columbia University, April 6, 1968, at combined meeting of N.Y.C. Early Childhood Council and the Metropolitan Association for Childhood Education on Language Arts Materials in Early Childhood.

The proliferation of materials for use in the curriculum area of Language Arts has been both a blessing and a burden. Basically the materials have not in general deviated too far from the variety of useful homemade materials one always found in a really good teacher's closet. Aside from looking more polished and shiny than the teacher's, these materials have the major virtue of saving the classroom teacher hours of precious time in preparing materials herself, and that virtue is not to be sneered at. On the other hand, the teacher is now confronted with a task of selection from a barrage of supplies and advertising that is overwhelming. Under the circumstances it becomes simpler to accept the choices made for her by the school administrator, even though the selection may not reflect her more intimate knowledge of her own children. The administrator on the other hand may not know young children particularly well and may order all the new things just to be sure he's "in." The present abundance of language arts materials, then, is a mixed blessing. The negative facets of this problem are more significant for us than they might otherwise be because of the climate in which we are selecting materials for children's growth and learning in the language arts.

Ours is a climate in which materials are being put forth as panaceas because their mass production and distribution are related not only to children's needs but to the covetousness of those who recognize education as a rich lode to mine. It is also a climate in which the differences between a preschool child, a primary child and a middle school child are blurry in the minds of all too many people new

to early childhood; and a climate in which the differences between decoding, reading for purpose and prereading experiences are also blurry for the same or perhaps still another group of people. To top it all we have a national psychology of haste in a total climate of anxiety about academic failure that makes realistic decisions about young children a matter of genuine uncertainty. One might add also that the remarkable efficiency of machinery has seduced the unwary into a paralysis of their human faculties of observation, reasoning and judgment.

Too many teachers and administrators settle for the latest materials and the newest equipment with a comfortable sense of security in a job well done that detracts their attention from the heart of the teaching-learning process, namely the teacher-child interaction around content meaningful to children. In an urban school an assistant principal recently pointed with conviction to the new viewing and listening machines for the preschoolers, and spoke with pride of the workshop her staff attended to learn how to handle the machines. But in a classroom for young children in that same school, the visitor observed that the three teachers and paraprofessional in charge of the eleven children present that day had nothing to say to the children in a full hour that could not be summed up in three phrases: "Sit up nicely." "You are sitting up nicely." "Line up."

Materials cannot be examined as phenomena in isolation. A language arts example from the past that perhaps makes good sense in illustrating this point is the way in which children's classics have been used by teachers and parents for the wrong children at the wrong ages and with the wrong emphasis, simply because the experts recommended "the classics." Yet the history of the classics themselves is replete with mistakes. e.g., The Wizard of Oz was put onto the lists of classics in the nineteen twenties after years of being rejected by the librarians, and then only because children insisted on reading The Wizard of Oz, recommended or not.

A study of children's reading tastes some decades later by Norvell revealed that neither Alice in Wonderland nor Winnie the Pooh are as widely beloved by all children as one might think.

At the same time, we can point out that The Three Bears was a favorite story of young children long before it occurred to anyone that what was missing from the lives of preschoolers was one-to-one correspondance, number concepts, concepts of size and shape or perception of differences and likenesses. Take another look at The Three Bears and see what comes through to children in these areas. What no one has stopped to say is that the children who do not have number concepts, concepts of shape and size, perception of likeness and difference, and understanding of correspondance when they arrive at first grade happen to be the same children for whom bedtime never did include The Three Bears or any other story. On that basis, we are on as good ground as anyone in suggesting that it is just possible that the road to sophisticated conceptualization for the disadvantaged young child is really many hearings of The Three Bears!

It is very important that we think clearly about the purposes to which materials can be put. For which children are they best used? At what point in the children's development in language and as a whole are they helpful? In relation to what other experiences do they serve the children best? Language arts materials are indeed tools to aid the teaching-learning process and many that are around today would warm a teacher's heart for their imaginativeness, colorfulness, warmth and humor. Bill Martin's reading books are a case in point. But each material is only as good as the originator's understanding of children and how children learn; only as effective as the teacher's discriminating use.

The materials in the collection here and many more not here displayed can be broadly divided into materials related to the reading process, and those believed to aid in prereading readiness. Most deal

with the recurring and persistent needs of children in the language arts as these have long been understood. There are now many more examples of the same kinds of things. There are also some materials which reflect a conscious concern for newly discovered deficiencies, and a group of materials that attempt to develop competency in thinking processes related to language. One could classify the materials in terms of the functions they support, and for better or for worse here is one such way to do that.

1. One group of materials is meant to encourage, support or reinforce the skills of listening to, absorbing and/or imitating the English language. These materials may or may not show concern for the intellectual or emotional content appropriate to the children for whom they are prepared. They are meant to be used by the teacher with a group or with one child, by a child or small group without a teacher. The newer crop of these materials is different from the old primarily in the mechanical rendition of teaching aids and processes used before, the oldest of which is perhaps the story. Some deal only with specific aspects of language, i.e., the sentence, isolated words, or pronunciation; others add music, drama or pictures to the language.

2. Association of symbols and meaning. Oral language, itself the first symbol system a child learns, must be associated with non-verbal symbols if the written symbol is to be usefully interpreted in time. Pictures, flash cards, lotto games, film strips, (essentially pictures again), viewing and listening machines, and strip books are examples of such materials. The symbols used are pictures and/or print.

The meaning associated with symbols follows a hierarchy of difficulty of comprehension somewhat as follows: a first association is between object and spoken word (its symbol), the second is between the <u>picture</u> of an object and the spoken word (symbol + symbol) then, the <u>picture</u> of the object and the <u>written</u> word (symbol + symbol of a symbol).

The simple object-word relationship goes on to more complexity, e.g., actions and activities. Here too there is the same hierarchy of learning - the action itself and the spoken word (e.g., walking, running, eating), the picture of the action and the spoken word, the picture of the action and the written word.

It is at this point that we begin to get the innovation. Objects and activities have their origin in the physical experience of the child. The labels allow a child to deal with his environment more efficiently since he need no longer point or act out in order to communicate. In fact, the label becomes one of the properties of the object or activity. It is a genuine tool for the child. Words are thus a genuine tool for the child as they help to extend, clarify and intensify the concrete experience. But we now find a new set of language materials appearing in which concepts and labels are being associated -- e.g., beyond, above, beside; under, over, below, and their like. However, the labelling of objects and activities associates words with experiences a child understands and thus extends the maneuverability of his powers of communication and probably of thinking. But language arts materials that label concepts are meant to develop understanding of the concept, and we are on shaky ground. There are unanswered questions here which the advertising of the material does not make clear. These questions have to do with the very process of learning. It has been generally understood that sufficient sensory experiences, translated into words, lay the base for what Joseph Church calls upward categorization, i.e., the abstraction of a common property inherent in objects and experiences which are different in their overt, concrete facets. Children who have not had sufficient experience of a sensory nature, nor sufficient language accompanying their experience, seem to suffer from a real disability in abstracting the intrinsic, shared characteristic of phenomena which appear different. No one really knows, however, whether a young child's understanding of concepts can develop out of a symbolic approach

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without rich and variegated sensory experience to support it. Certainly the findings of John Navarra on the nature of young children's conceptual learning would seem to contradict so simple an approach as labelling to so complex a learning experience as a concept. We have no reason to believe that the growth of disadvantaged children is basically different from that of all children in this regard.

There is no question that children need help and support in their thinking processes, and especially our non-learners do. I am raising the question here about the use of symbols - pictures and words - to deepen understanding of such abstract processes as relationship and classification for children with a paucity of sensory experience, when normally developing children are coping with such abstractions at about age four in relation to the primary experiences within the family; or the use of pictures and words to teach ordinarily difficult concepts of time and space, when, for example, spatial concept or lateral awareness is learned bodily to begin with, and time is grasped as a result of repetitive experiences over time.

In the March issue of Young Children Ellen de Hart quotes a study by Harmon (1945) to the effect that children must first learn physical awareness of each side of the body before the words "left" and "right" have meaning: that this physical awareness gives a child a sense of his own body-balance which is related to his orientation to space: and that relationships exist between a child's body-balancing mechanisms and his performances in close visually centered activities such as reading, writing and drawing.

Young children are wedded to the sensory for a long time. Although abstract thinking eventually feeds on itself - e.g., statistics is a language unrelated to human experience of a sensory nature - abstractions on abstractions occur among adults and older children. It is questionable that one could bring young children to this point in development through

the avenue of symbols without prior sensory experience, teaching them the process of conceptualizing, without content.

3. The third function of language arts materials is to aid in the recognition of symbols and symbol systems. Here there is a wide variety of materials ranging from pictures to individual letters, to all kinds of combinations of letters that allow exploratory, experimental and self-correcting experience. Examples are lotto games, flash cards and, of course, reading matter. For parts of words there are vowel dominoes, phonics games, picture-phonics, consonant lotto, etc. For whole words there are picture-word cards, sight vocabulary cards, flash cards. The materials here are mainly developed in the symbol-for-a-symbol realm, i.e., print.

4. The fourth function is support for the use of symbols for communication. While much of the oral language needs must be fulfilled in the course of ongoing teacher-child interaction, and through games, most of the materials are on the next level - i.e., symbol-for-symbol, and encourage making words oneself - e.g., writing, spelling, rhyming.

5. A fifth function deals with specific physiological function. Some materials are designed to assist motor coordination, perceptual constancy, perception of spatial relationships, perception of position in space. Originally developed for brain damaged children whose deficits can be assessed, they are nevertheless being sold for disadvantaged children where no such assessment has been made.

6. Reading materials serve a special function of their own and we could take an entire meeting on the different bases for their manufacture. Readers based on the vocabulary lists that grade words according to difficulty are giving way to readers based on phonic systems, linguistic regularity, story content with childhood appeal, or experience-language relationships. Most lay out the steps to follow and in some cases even the words to say with a thoroughness that leaves the teacher no room for

adaption to her pupils. Others indicate where adaptiveness is possible and draw the teacher in as a co-worker in the task. Some provide much variety within the series; others make provision for individual difference in such a way that all too often such provision turns out to be more drill and practice for an individual rather than provision for differences.

7. The last area I should like to discuss is the area of literature as a tool for teaching language arts, and I should like to describe briefly a study proving the effect of literature on the vocabulary and reading of disadvantaged second graders. The study appears in greater detail in the February issue of Elementary English. The approach to poor readers in that study was not related to methods of teaching at all, although it was clearly concerned with materials. The materials were chosen to tap and develop two ingredients necessary for growth in reading -- a) the desire to read, and b) the oral language power which is the base for comprehension of written symbols for words.

The teachers participating in the study were asked to read to the children every day. None of them felt they could manage to find the time to do this because they were so busy teaching the children to read. Nevertheless, they finally agreed. Books for them to read to the children were chosen according to two criteria: a) the central theme was comprehensible to children of this age, and b) it was possible for children to identify emotionally with the story.

The appeal of literature at all levels lies in the fact that it deals with the human condition. It offers a mirror of man's behavior through which a reader deepens and broadens his understanding of the human condition. This is true of literature for children as it is of literature for adults. Good literature for children taps a universality of childhood experience which crosses class, ethnic, racial and national lines. Although the children in the study were "disadvantaged" children, stories

chosen for them had appeal for all children their age, and therefore for them too. The only acknowledgement given to their deficiencies was to their inexperience in listening. Short stories were used first, stories with less complex plots and less complex sentences. But the basic theme of the story was meaningful to the age group, and as they learned to take in stretches of oral language, longer and more complex stories were read on equally comprehensible themes. The children understood and could identify with the frustrations of Andy in Nobody Listens to Andy, the fear of Scaredy Cat or Timid Timothy, the victory of a subordinate over the authorities in Five Chinese Brothers and so on. As they grasped the theme and identified emotionally with the stories read to them purely for pleasure (no book reports, no tests!) - two things happened. a) Love of books and therefore motivation for reading grew; b) the words of the books became familiar, and began to stick. Tests of reading and vocabulary were given to experimental and control classes in October and in June. The children who were read to every day did significantly better in reading and vocabulary than the controls who were being taught to read by the same basal series method.

Two important findings from that study leave something to think about. The first is that experimental and control groups were alike in their level of word discrimination skills, but the experimental group read better! The second is that the lowest, bottom-of-the grade control children never got off the ground, which is characteristic in this population, but the experimental children reversed the trend toward failure and began to inch forward.

These children did not, in one year, leap into high reading levels, although some did, but they improved in their reading skill and vocabulary as a result of learning to enjoy and value books for their humanist qualities, not their "educational" value. They did this without pressure, without rewards or punishment, responding as children to that which has

meaning and appeal to children.

In examining materials and methods in language arts experiences for young children, there is no evidence that suggests that it is necessary to discard certain basic understandings of development and growth in the approach to curriculum and materials for young children, despite the societal sense of urgency about making up deficits for particular groups of children. (In fact, one of the questions we may have to ask ourselves in this latter connection is itself a basic one - namely, whether haste and compensatory growth can serve each other.) Basic approaches incorporate many important insights that have served early childhood educators well in their work with children, and which must be the setting for any specific material or technique we examine. Two such basic approaches I would suggest today: 1) the way in which language is learned by all young human beings before anyone intervenes to teach it to them; 2) the pattern of anticipatory behavior in the human child and the concept of antecedent behavior related to future objectives and goals. Let us examine these in greater detail.

1. <u>How Language is Learned</u>. It is known that children learn their language from a model, and that they will faithfully parrot any model they are offered in infancy and toddlerhood. The model is inclusive - it offers not only the specific language of English, French, Swahili or Chinese - but the variations within the generic language that stem from regional, educational, historical or any other experiential difference. A model is therefore a most important element in the child's language learning, and it is easy to assume from this that proper models faithfully imitated will lead to improvement in language. Many of the materials now on the market and meant for language development are based on this truism. However, the concept of imitation of a model as the totality of language learning leaves out an equally important variable in human language learning - namely the interactive, communicative aspect of language. When Vygotsky wrote his <u>Thought and Language</u> in the early nineteen thirties, it is significant that his

point of departure from psychologists concerned with language development up to that date was precisely on this issue, i.e., the mechanics of speech vs. the meaning of language. Early analysis of children's language learning dealt with the mechanics of language construction, rather than the role of language in communication. Therefore, the component parts of speech were counted, divided, subdivided and given relationships, with attention to the age at which babbling appears, the order in which a child pronounces sounds, the number of words a child knows at a given age, and the order in which words are learned, i.e., nouns, verbs, prepositions, etc. It is from this approach that norms emerged about how many words a child should know, and lists of graded vocabulary formed the base for the graded reading series known as the basal readers. Many of the early findings are being challenged today. Those on the numbers of words a child knows at a given age are seriously questioned now that more sophisticated techniques are available for vocabulary studies. Others, such as the graded lists in the basal series, are being challenged by linguists on grounds of structural logic, and by educators concerned with children's ego involvement and motivation. Vygotsky's dispute was with the interpretation of what a word is. In the earlier view, a word is seen as a composite of sounds and letters, it has a place in the linear structure of the English sentence, and is to be studied for these properties. While a word is certainly a composite of sounds, Vygotsky chose to interpret a word as a unit of meaning, and a classification of experience. In this view, words are dependent for their existence and growth in the development of a child's language, on <u>a relationship between a child and an adult</u>. Words, according to Vygotsky, are not learned merely by imitating the sound and intonation - they are learned in a context of interpersonal interaction in which, according to Bernstein, they become the carriers of the perceptions of the adults about the environment which child and adult share. Thus, an adult whose perceptions of the environment

are richly variegated and refined, passes on to the child this perception via the words he uses. The child does not merely imitate words - he uses them in a responding, interacting way. The baby who is told "Bring mommy her pocketbook,"does not repeat "Bring mommy her pocketbook." He gets it and says, "Here it is."

We know from our studies of abandoned and neglected children that where there has been no human contact, there has been no language development. But the lesson for teachers of young children is twofold: language learning requires a model, but the model must be available in a living relationship between a child and an adult, in an interaction with the environment that involves the affective and the social aspects of communicating along with the mechanics of the proper model. The specifics of syntax, grammar and vocabulary must be learned via content that is emotionally satisfying to a young child, socially useful, and cognitively enriching. Without the content, the human use of human language is seriously curtailed, even if speech is in a complete sentence. The poorest and most impoverished child is entitled to the full scope that language makes possible, and not the mere parroting of form isolated from meaningful content.

In the current proliferation of materials in the language arts, one sees evidence of both the early approach to language learning in terms of its mechanics, and the deeper approach to language development as intricately related to thought and experience, a major aspect of human relating, exchanging, sharing, and enriching, in which the mechanics serve a larger purpose.

2. <u>The Pattern of Anticipatory Behavior and the Relation of Antecedent Practice to Later Goals</u>. The growing human organism does not achieve full maturity in several easy steps, but instead spirals its way through progressions and regressions that are highly dependent upon the connection-making between the inner endowment and the environmental opportunity for fulfillment. From conception on, there are evidences of anticipatory

behavior, and one can classify these in several ways. One kind of anticipatory behavior produces a response prematurely, as if the reality of the situation is not fully grasped and one's wishes determine the response. Thus, Pavlov's dogs salivated before the introduction of the food if there was a long wait between the conditioned and the unconditioned stimuli. Another kind of anticipatory behavior has the look of <u>forerunner</u> behavior, such as the appearance of the first word in a baby of 9 or 10 months which often is followed by long months of no further speech, not even the repetition of the already spoken word. Then there is anticipatory behavior expressed as a global grasp of the behavioral meaning, but with no real ability to perform in the way one understands. Loretta Bender speaks of the behavior of normal three year olds who say they must not hit, but <u>do</u> hit, in contrast to emotionally disturbed children who never say they must not hit. The child being toilet trained is known to get as far as the bathroom door and then wet himself with complete composure; the six year old knows stealing is wrong, but steals if he has the chance. Not much is known about anticipatory behavior in children, but if one's observations can be trusted, there seems to be a relationship between a tentative, undeveloped activity that bears vague relationship to the later behavior and a global perception of the goal which seems helpful to the later attainment of the behavior itself.

Such a relationship leads us inevitably to consider what kinds of antecedent behavior to encourage in a child in order to help him towards the goal in mind. Language happens to serve as a mediator between the unknown and the known, and we know for example, that children who know the names of objects learn to know those objects faster than those for which they have no names. We know there is a connection between understanding of and knowing the words for the shades of meaning attached to experience. Children learn words like <u>if</u>, <u>because</u> and <u>when</u> before they grasp concepts of <u>condition</u>, <u>cause</u> or <u>time</u>. It would seem, therefore, that language as

a mediator in anticipating later learning is useful, and indeed, many materials in the language arts are meant to serve just such bridges to later learning. We are unfortunately left with a great many unanswered questions, however, and cannot settle for a simple one-to-one correspondance in considering antecedent behavior for learning in the language arts. We do know that children learn through their senses. But we do not know or understand to what an extent a child must gain his impressions through his physical senses before words, along with words or after words. We do not know what kind of ratio or balance must exist between sensory learning and words for optimum growth. We do know that children can be wedded to the concrete to the exclusion of words as mediators for all kinds of school learning. But we also know, although it is not advertised as loudly, that children can be remarkably glib with language and not know what they're talking about. We do not know exactly how language and thought are interrelated although we know they are. In many cases words illuminate concrete experience; in other cases words extend concrete experience; in still other cases words lead to and back from concrete experiences. As we use materials for the development of language, do we know how that material has bearing on these kinds of relationships? In one of the important tests of linguistic skills, a criticism of the sub-tests is that they may not be measuring what the test maker thinks he is measuring and the reason for that is the theoretical fuzziness on which linguistic testing and diagnosis is necessarily based. At this stage of our knowledge can we be overstressing one kind of learning for another because we do not have the perspective of time or experience to guide us? How precisely do we understand the relation between today's learning in a child and tomorrow's performance in the adult? The vast majority of studies in reading go no further than the end of third grade, and within that batch entirely too many are of the first year only. The present proliferation of materials for language learning suffers from the same shortcoming of assuming that short term objectives lead to long-term results.

In one of the very few studies carried past the third grade, the British D.E.M. Gardner was able to compare the effects of a more traditional highly structured primary program with a more informal approach to children's school learning (and I may add disadvantaged children) on two separate occasions. The first research was unfortunately ended by World War II and did not study results past the primary grades (the infant school). The informal program did not appear to be holding its own on many measures of language arts. The second research, published in 1966, was able to include children <u>beyond</u> the primary grades in informal as well as formal middle schools (junior schools) who had had an informal play program at the primary level. The first research which ended prematurely did not show gains for the informal approach. But the later research which followed the children to age ten, <u>did</u>, and the gains were strong in English, including writing skills.

It should be clear that the whole question of antecedent behavior by which we try to encourage behavior before it would come naturally, if at all, and the kind of learning we seek to encourage, has to be looked at with the humility of our uncertainty. Too often, as Hunt pointed out, antecedent behavior does not show a direct and obvious relationship to later goals. In the area of language learning the subtleties are harder to tackle than the mechanics. To learn to speak, a child does not learn parts of speech; he learns to hear, to translate, to respond and somehow to do this with the parts of speech he has not been deliberately trained to repeat. Where the model has been poor, are we sure that the antecedent learning for effective language usage in a communicative relationship is repetition of whole sentences unrelated to a total interaction among adults and children? On what basis can we be sure? Does the fact that children have not had optimum opportunity for growth mean that they follow laws of growth dramatically different from other children? Or is it possible that we have not yet figured out how to respect the integrity of disadvantaged

children which, like for all children, calls for growth in many directions at the same time that we seek ways of helping them out of the special ruts life has put them into. Why should disadvantaged children receive less?

Language must not be separated from thought, nor taken out of its human communicative context. Materials chosen for young children must be concerned with content until that time in the life of a child when the experience of practising bits and pieces is seen for its relation to the objectives he understands and accepts. Learning of this kind has its value and its place, but the younger the child, the more the total experiential situation must be stimulating, interpersonal, and focused on content and feeling that are meaningful to children. The younger the child, the more language must play a <u>supportive</u> role in the sensory learning so characteristic of early childhood.